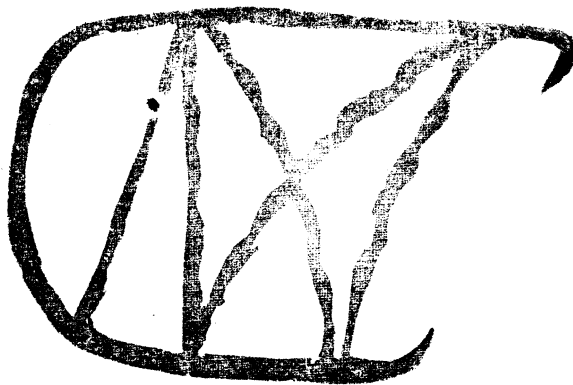


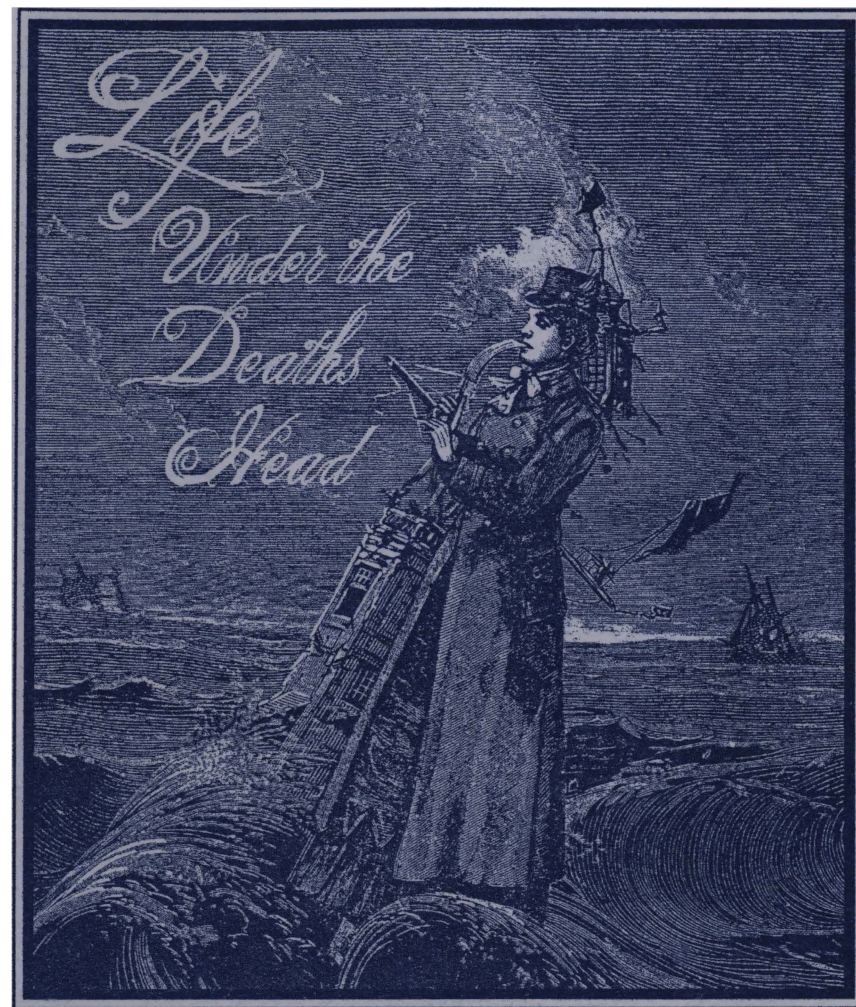
This essay addresses the slave-like social conditions created by the capitalist age and seeks to discover, in spite of it, a philosophical space from which to struggle against despair and to affirm life. In pursuing this outlook, Gabrielle Kuhn revisits a time when society as a whole did not yet completely support and mirror the process of reproducing Capital and large portions of the globe were not yet enclosed—the *Golden Age of Piracy*! Piracy was an anarchic mode of existence that sought to challenge the coercive manipulations of the emerging monetary Empires and preserve, against enormous odds, one's psychic and physical integrity, which is ground down daily by civilization's mechanisms. Piracy was also a rebellion undertaken without any of the trappings of domestication, carried out by human beings refusing to live forever in the condition of prostitution.

In addition to Kuhn's lawless essay, this pamphlet also contains a thoughtful afterword by Damon Nomad.

ENEMY COMBATANT PUBLICATIONS



ALTAMONT, MARYLAND



ANARCHISM AND PIRACY

BY GABRIELLE KUHN

**LIFE UNDER THE
DEATH'S HEAD:**

**ANARCHISM
AND
PIRACY**

BY GABRIELLE KUHN

**WITH A CRITICAL AFTERWORD
BY DAMON NOMAD**

be one even if I throw out my computer (and all other modern technology) and take to hunting, gathering, low-level horticulture and living off the land. But I do want to live my life on my own terms and to do so against the existing structures of authority. As I said, I was able to find some ideas in Kuhn's essay that I can use in my effort to fulfill that desire. But there could have been much more if Kuhn had thrown out all the baggage of academic theory, gotten rid of the over-inflated, substance-less verbiage of post-structuralist philosophy, and made more real comparisons and contrasts with various rebels and enemies of authority. Anarchy has no need for academia, nor for its terminology and its substance-less abstractions. Nor does any outlaw.

Damon Nomad

Introduction

Sea robbers have been robbing since the dawn of sea travel, just as thieves have been stealing since the advent of private property. But only a small proportion of sea robbers are truly pirates. Piracy is a form of life. It has its own conditions, its own rules and ways of thought. Pirates, men and women, answer to no one except for the crew of the ship in which they are sailing at the moment, and only after joining it of their own free will. Pirates have themselves, their group, their ship, perhaps a couple of retreats, and nothing else. They obey nothing and no one, have no nation to defend, no leader, no God, no government, no State. "They did not serve in an orderly militia, they fought neither for King nor Country, nor any abstract cause."¹ Stirner's maxim applies: "No cause, no so-called 'highest interest of humanity' no 'holy thing' is so worthy that you should serve it, or attend to it for its own sake."² Pirates are "anarchists and nihilists. They robbed and murdered in territorial and non-territorial waters alike. When forcing entry they showed no concern whatsoever for either the nationality or the proprietors of the ships they commandeered."³

According to this understanding, and in contradiction to what is normally claimed, the following are *not* pirates:

Vikings were invading warriors plundering on the high seas and in coastal regions.

Traditional *Chinese sea robbers*, men and women, were actually criminal syndicates operating on the sea.

Sea robbers of Brittany, who were sea robbers in every sense of the word, were not pirates however, but mostly peasants.

Most importantly, *filibusters* were by no stretch of the imagination pirates. They were unofficial English or French imperialist war fleets, plundering and murdering in the name of, and with support from, their kings and queens. "They legalized their privateering by being in possession of official written permission to privateer, issued in each case by their monarch. To describe a Francis Drake or a Henry Morgan⁴ as a pirate is thus tantamount to a form of "blasphemy." That many filibusters did end up becoming real pirates does not change that.

* A new English translation by Wolfi Landstreicher of Stirner's *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum* will be coming out soon. Because Gabriel Kuhn makes some strange choices in his translation, I am putting footnotes with Landstreicher's translation in the text for comparison. Landstreicher's translation: "No thing, no so-called 'highest interest of humanity', no 'sacred cause', is worthy of you serving it and dealing with it for its sake..."

But among sea robbers there were also those who were always under pursuit because they refused to subjugate themselves to rulers – largely people whom we would today describe as “dropouts,” who did not want to submit to bourgeois laws, or who had already come into direct conflict with those laws... This kind of “autonomous” piracy was a monkey wrench thrown into the colonization process. Its practitioners were unwilling to be registered, or corrupted by either money or office. They therefore became the target of international police pursuit.⁵

And they are our subject here. True piracy represents only a small part of the history of sea robbery. Geographically concentrated in the Caribbean (and a little bit around Madagascar and African coastal zones) and historically spanning just 30 years – the period from around 1690 to around 1720 – the “Golden Age” of piracy is in fact the only time when it ever really existed. It certainly merits closer study and examination that it has received until now.

Definition of Terms

Freedom

Unemployment, subjugation and exploitation, threat of punishment, lust for adventure, boredom... Many reasons are given for why so many men and a few women ran off to live as pirates late in the seventeenth century. “For those seeking individuality, wealth, and flight from oppression, life on board a pirate ship offered incomparable possibilities.”⁶

What do all these reasons have in common? Breaking out of structured obedience, pre-set orders and moral unities; escape from assigned roles, authoritarian hierarchies, and a perpetually expanding apparatus of control and supervision; in short, flight from everything that reeks of an increasingly powerful bourgeois society. Instead, there is a plunge into a world of unpredictability, danger, excitement, excessive living, fast death; of “war, adventure, hunt, dance, fighting games, and everything that strong, free, cheerful action implies.”⁷ A world of fluctuation (sometimes on this ship, sometimes on that; sometimes this tour of plunder, sometimes that; sometimes these rules, sometimes those). A world within which the individual always remains singular, however, always one’s own person, only connecting with others in order to be stronger and have fun, and disconnecting when that is no longer the case. For “ego knows no commandment of ‘loyalty, dependency, and so on.’ Ego allows everything, including apostasy, defection.”^{8**}

** Landstreicher’s translation: “... ownness knows no commandment of “faithfulness, devotion, etc.,” ownness allows everything, even desertion, defection.”

had any awareness of this alleged “fundamental principle” of their life. But once again Kuhn decided to borrow obscure terminology that two academic theorists borrowed from science (in this case, chemistry) and impose it on his subject. Since this chemical metaphor – once you know the meaning of the terms “molecular” and “molar” in chemistry, where they are not at all opposing terms – doesn’t make sense in the way Deleuze and Guattari use it, it inevitably detracts from Kuhn’s clarity.¹

I could go on about the way that Kuhn’s insistence on applying Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” led him to completely pass over the significance of each pirate ship having its own unique “Jolly Roger”, or about the utter uselessness of the idea of the “nomadic war machine” even to understanding the conquests of Attila the Hun or Genghis Khan, let alone developing an understanding of piracy that might be of actual use to someone who wants to live outside the constraints of society now. But I would get bored going into more detail about the uselessness of Professor Deleuze and Doctor Guattari.

I think Kuhn might have been able to use Dr. Clastres better, but he decides to use the anthropologist’s ideas in the same way he uses Deleuze and Guattari’s terms and abstractions ... as molds into which to force the image of the pirate. I think a comparison between pirate life and primitive life could be interesting – if that comparison looks at similarities *and differences*. Pirates were *not* primitive people.² Piracy as a way of life was mainly the reaction by those who grew up in the civilized world against that world. It might make sense to refer to pirates as “feral”, but not as “primitive”. It is interesting that the anthropologist Kuhn chose to give him the mold of “primitive” into which he seeks to fit the pirate was Clastres, because Clastres’ studies centered around indigenous people of South America, whose cultures had a history of dealing with an actual imperial state – the Incan empire – before Europe arrived. How much of the anti-state praxis of these groups was in place before the Incas began to build their state power is impossible for you and I to know. But it offers Kuhn a view of what it means to be primitive that he can use for his purpose, a purpose, unfortunately, far less useful or interesting than an exploration of the *contrasts* between pirates and primitives as well as their similarities. Of course, I am being selfish in this. I am not a primitive. I won’t

1, I could rant on here about the tendency of post-structuralist philosophers and academic cultural theorists to use scientific terminology out of context as a way to make their meaningless blatherings seem somehow more ... objective, perhaps, or maybe more “materialist” as opposed to idealist. But, in fact, it simply makes them appropriate targets for mockery ... but I will save that for another time.

2 Of course, certain individuals in a pirate crew may have come from so-called primitive groups who had been forced to leave the places they lived and their ways of life due to the European invasions of the time, but they were joining together largely with civilized people who were rejecting and attacking the rules imposed by their own civilization.

actually *smooth* spaces (when they do it is because those spaces are sparsely populated – often due to a difficulty of access that exists because of a lack of smoothness in the surrounding area and perhaps a great deal of roughness on the small scale in the immediate space). Rather they choose spaces with substantial relatively chaotic variations and textures in their surface ... rough, broken, discontinuous spaces ... mountains, forests, ravines, swamplands (in the case of pirates when they were on shore). In a city, if I don't want to be seen, I don't go to the smooth areas of wide boulevards or parking lots. I seek out the alleys and backways, especially those cluttered with dumpsters, trash, and whatnot that can provide temporary hiding places if necessary. A philosophy might indeed imagine a "smooth space" as a place of invisibility; an outlaw, who lives in *actual* worlds and not in realms of abstraction, knows better. But Deleuze and Guattari's use "smooth" as the opposite of "striated" not as the opposite of "rough", "discontinuous", etc. It's one of many examples in which they borrow scientific language (in this case, from physiology, which distinguishes "smooth" from "striated" muscles) to give an apparent validity to their mostly useless metaphors.

If instead of turning to the abstract theory of an academic philosopher and a post-marxist communist psycho-therapist, Kuhn had chosen to compare the way of life pirates took up to that of other outlaws, he might have been able to draw far more profound conclusions about pirate invisibility. The social transformations that began in the late Middle Ages and that eventually evolved into what I and most of those reading this would call capitalism and the modern State led to a great deal of resistance, some more political in content, but much of it taking the form of personal refusal to accept the new life being imposed. Banditry and other forms of life that refused the rule of work, obedience, the law and the economy were rampant. The poetry of Villon, the picaresque novels popular in the 17th and 18th centuries, the pamphlets warning about "rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars" (often reading more like "how-to" manuals for those wanting to take up that life-style), the many accounts of famous highwaymen and women, and the like show a world full of outlaws as much on land as on sea. And a comparison of pirates with these other outlaws – in terms of attitudes, advantages and disadvantages of the different methods, etc., could have been very interesting. And I think such a comparison would expose the uselessness of Deleuze and Guattari's physiological metaphor in dealing *practically* with the use of invisibility in an outlaw way of life.

Kuhn borrows other terminology from Deleuze and Guattari to muddy his otherwise fairly clear writing. So, for example, when describing the "freedom" of pirates (the first section under "Definition of Terms"), he tells us: "Becoming *molecular* (as opposed to molar) is a fundamental principle of pirate life." I'm willing to bet that not a single pirate of the "golden age of piracy"

Accordingly it has been observed that: "Pirate crews have a very high turnover."⁹ "They [the pirates] were a fluctuating pack in every way, constantly in motion, changing in number or composition from one month to the next. Nothing and no one, neither ship nor captain, or any matter bound to them, obligated obedience."¹⁰ Those who flee the State discover they have joined a molecular world. Becoming *molecular* (as opposed to molar) is a fundamental principle of pirate life.

The escaped slave, the unemployed manual laborer, the murderess in flight, the lunger without means, and the jaded daughter "of a better family" – all receive the same rights under piracy. "No social distinctions or particular classes could be found within their society. Everyone sailed as an equal on the ship."¹¹ Especially remarkable are the opportunities that arose in the pirate world for women: "Pirate women were considered especially dangerous, and accepted as leaders at a time when women on land had long been robbed of rights and dignity."¹² Each pirate developed his or her own kind of pirate life, determined by one's self, and no other.

He [the pirate] was considered world enemy number one, to be hunted and killed at anyone's whim. He never sailed in the service of a king, possessed no written license that "legalized" his privateering, and sailed nearly exclusively under a "Jolly Roger" the black sea robber's flag. He had no home, the seas was his only residence. He was considered a stranger and an outcast from society. He had no family in the usual sense, and no children except for those outside marriage. His daily concerns consisted in privateering, robbing, and occasionally killing. Every day he had to be prepared to die.¹³

The pirate thus becomes Max Stirner's "ego"^{***} – which bears no relation to bourgeois reactive 'indivi-Dualism' – but which destroys the preordained self, and makes concrete and constantly changing subjectifications into the active basis of life. "The ego is one born free, free from the start; ... [He] is originally free, because he recognizes no power other than his own; he requires no liberation, because from the start he rejects everything except himself, because he values nothing more highly than himself, aims for nothing higher; in short, because he acts from himself."¹⁴ What is true of the ego could also be set up as

*** Kuhn uses "ego" to translate Stirner's "*Einzig*" ("unique"), "*Eigen*" ("own one") and "*Eigenheit*" ("ownness"), none of which, as he rightly notes, bear any resemblance to "bourgeois reactive 'indivi-Dualism'".

o Landstreicher's translation: "The own one is the free-born, the one free from the start; ... [He] is free from the beginning, because he recognizes nothing but himself; he does not need to free himself first, because from the start he rejects everything outside himself, because he prizes nothing more than himself, deems nothing higher than himself, in short, because he starts from himself and 'comes to himself'."

the defining characteristic of the pirate: “I am my self only when not ruled by sensory nature, or in any way by another (God, people, authority, law, State, church, etc.), but by my self alone.”¹⁵

Of all the reasons we might count among those to become a pirate, there is only one true explanation for choosing the life of the pirate as described herein. In the origins of piracy we see nothing at work other than the unbound desire for singularity and independence. Without the least concern for abstract and thus empty and completely used-up bourgeois ideals of “individualism” and “freedom,” pirates show what it means to live in a permanently actualizing process of individualization and liberation. “The pride in being a sea robber was felt equally by every member of the pirate community. They considered themselves the only ones in the world who were not subjugated to any statist force.”¹⁶

Space

A substantive prerequisite for the departure into freedom, with which piracy begins, is the appearance of a space that promises and allows the development of freedom. In the seventeenth century, European space was already very strongly curtailed. The vagabonds of the Middle Ages could no longer vagabond, because no place was left for them to wander about. Just when space on land was becoming more and more scarce, the smooth, still nearly uncontrolled space of the sea opened up for escape. The sea was not yet divided and controlled, but offered a space of freedom, a space of potential diversity as the precondition for the fluctuations indispensable to pirate life. “Not only does anything populating a smooth space represent a diversity that changes its essence whenever it divides (like tribes in the desert; the distances change constantly, the clans are in perpetual metamorphosis). The smooth space itself (desert, steppe, sea, or eternal ice) is also a diversity of this kind: ametric, acentered, undesigned.”¹⁷

The pirate ship sailing alone on open sea was completely unobserved. No one knew where it was. No aircraft, no radar, no high-tech navigation system, no controlled sea travel. The sea was indeed a smooth space at the time the pirates set out to make themselves “lords of the sea”. Some go as far as to claim: “The sea is perhaps the most significant of smooth spaces, the hydraulic model par excellence.”¹⁸

We see the question of the possibilities in piracy is mostly a question of space. If smooth spaces disappear, if all spaces are carved up, then piracy is finished. Undetectability, like molecularity, is inseparable from piracy.

a Landstreicher's translation: “I am my own only when I am in my own power, and not in the power of sensuality or any other thing (God, humanity, authority, law, state, church, etc.)...”

AFTERWORD:

My Dagger to the Academic Throat

By Damon Nomad

Gabriel Kuhn's assessment of “life under the death's head” was certainly worth my time to read. I could draw insights from it not only for a historical perspective on the nature of piracy, but also with regard to the question of how to live outside of and in conflict with the ruling order now. At the same time, Kuhn's essay is flawed. And the flaws relate, to a large extent, to the effects of his time in academia and his interest in post-structuralist methods of analysis.

I get the impression that Kuhn is no longer participating in the academic framework. His writing is mostly clear (even if tainted with the pseudo-scientific language of Deleuze and Guattari, who borrow from chemistry, botany, and other sciences to give their metaphors an appearance of being something more than rather cumbersome mystifications), and the eccentricities in his endnotes, his bibliography, and his insistence on making his own translations directly from whatever books and articles he is citing (even when the version he has is not in the original language) rather than finding the quotations in an existing English version could well point to a rebellion against the stultifying requirements of academia. But achieving a doctorate in philosophy with a specialty in post-structuralism will not leave a person unscathed.

What I found most useful in Kuhn's essay were his attempts to analyze (obviously from nearly two hundred years distance) how the pirates of the so-called “golden age of piracy” went about creating their lives against the ruling society: their brilliant use of invisibility combined with a kind of playful, darkly humorous ferocity that induced fear in their opponents, their refusal of accumulation, the nature of their associations of egoists (as pirate crews generally seemed to operate) where those involved made agreements, but anyone could get out of the agreement simply by leaving the crew, etc.

Unfortunately, Kuhn's reliance, in particular, on the writings and especially the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari often gets in the way of clarity. For example, he thinks he is explaining the pirates' capacity for invisibility when he talks about them operating on a “smooth space”. Anyone who has spent time on a desert plateau or, for that matter, on a smooth body of water, knows that smooth surfaces make for increased *visibility*; they do not provide places to hide. But in the abstract world of Deleuze and Guattari there are only smooth and striated spaces, and the latter are the spaces marked out by the state. In the actual worlds where outlaws might live out their lives, there are all sorts of spaces, and more often than not outlaws rarely choose

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Around 1700 it was possible to achieve such undetectability in the reaches of the Atlantic. And pirates were in fact imperceptible: "Hidden among the islands of the Caribbean or exposed to the tides within the river mouths of the Carolinas, the pirates nearly always spied out their prey before they themselves were discovered."¹⁹ And even when a pirate ship was sighted, it was not normally recognized as such, for the Jolly Roger would be pulled down in advance and replaced with some commercial flag. Only in the last moment before the direct encounter, before the attack, were the pirates suddenly recognizable as pirates: the Jolly Roger would run back up the mast.

Today all of that is but a dream. High-level technology makes any form of imperceptibility impossible: "Of all smooth spaces the sea was the first that had to be enclosed, transformed into a dependency of the land with set paths, constant directions, relative movements and a complete anti-hydraulics of canals and diversions."²⁰ "The enclosure of the sea occurs ... through navigation on the high seas."²¹ The pirates require their space. When there is no space within which we can move unobserved, then there is no more piracy – and no more freedom, "for we have then lost the place of freedom: space."²²

Nomads

Pirates settled on the smooth space of the sea, just as nomads do in that of the desert. They divided themselves over it without dividing it up. They slid about unobserved, always following the winds. They never came to rest, sometimes sailing completely new routes, sometimes well-known ones. They appeared from nowhere and disappeared back into it. The only landmarks were the many islands of the Caribbean where they occasionally landed to sell booty, restock the ship, play cards and love women or men. On the sea everything was open – no centers, no outlines, no predetermined paths. "In this sense nomads [pirates] have neither bases, nor paths, nor land."²³ Thus, of pirates, it might be said: "The only thing that they had in common was the sea. For this reason, if pirates on the open sea were called by another ship going past, and asked who they were and where they came from, the traditional pirate answer was, 'from the sea'."²⁴

At the time of piracy the Caribbean was a desert of water with small islands as the only landmarks, counterparts to the oases in the deserts of sand. It was in the pirates' interest that this space stay the same, remain a smooth space and allow their unpredictable gliding, keep their imperceptibility safe. It was thus unavoidable that "the Caribbean waters practically became a pirate sea."²⁵ Just as it is not only the desert that makes the nomads, but the nomads who also make the desert, so too is it not only the sea that makes the pirates, but the pirates who make the sea as sea (meaning as smooth space) – and block its development into state-controlled, waterbound property. "Through a series of local actions with variable orientation and direction, [nomads] add desert to the desert"²⁶

Pirates are the nomads of the sea. According to Deleuze, the key question today is: “Who are our contemporary nomads?”²⁷ If this is so, we must also ask who the pirates of today might be.

Activity

There are few people in whom we can see Nietzsche’s theory of “energy” or “force” [Kraft] at work as well as with pirates.

Active energy is primarily concerned with itself. Affirming life and itself, and driven by the will to power understood as a life-affirming principle, active energy perpetually struggles toward its full development. It is driven to its last limits, to the complete exhaustion of its resources.

Reactive energy is rather different, for it is driven by a will to power reduced to a will to nothing. Its only concern is limitation and destruction of all energies. No affirmation anymore; only negation and hatred of life. The reactive force wants nothing less than to block the development of other forces, to restrict them, ultimately to make them just as reactive. Reactive force thus voluntarily denies its own possibilities for activity, and constantly restricts itself: ascetic ideal in all its variations.

Statist societies (and most of all the bourgeois) stand for reactive life in its purest form. People trimmed down to their role in a rising bourgeois world, with its cleanliness, refinement, order, discipline; people forced to correspond to it so as not to be declared delinquent, and hence more or less free game; such people have no choice but to suppress activity and affirmation of life.

Piracy allows renewed development of active energy. We have seen how the departure into freedom is tantamount to departure into a life that begins anew, and knows nothing of rules that provoke reactivity. Class society, hierarchy, oppression, exploitation, national chauvinism, breeding and order – all conditions of rule that people could not escape in eighteenth century Europe – are merely laughed off and ridiculed in the Pirate Caribbean. For pirates, the point is to live life to the full, guided by molecular production of desire and not by any rigid social institutions. Freedom is unthinkable without the activity of forces and vice-versa.

Dreadfulness is admittedly still present, and there is no doubt that many pirates were often dreadful. But does that change the fact under piracy, activity, affirmation of life, and the free play of all energies replace a rigid, reactive societal order? Certainly not. In the pirate’s defense we must first of all admit that not every reactive energy can be extinguished so quickly, and the danger always lurks that reactivity can be tickled back to the surface. (Ignoring for a moment, by the way, that pirates were practically innocent

130 Salentiny, p. 29.

131 Nechayev (1847-1882): Russian anarchist; wrote the “Catechism of an Anarchist” together with Michail Bakunin. Starved after ten years in a Russian prison. [I can’t leave this not without comment. Nechayev never called himself an anarchist, but rather a “revolutionary” and a “nihilist”. His writing mentioned was “Catechism of a Revolutionary” – no “anarchist” anywhere in the title. And though marxists (since Marx himself) have accused Bakunin of co-writing it, there is no evidence that he did so, and Nechayev’s willingness to act in the most authoritarian ways in order to promote the cause of “revolution” had a great deal to do with Bakunin’s break with Nechayev.]

132 Stirner, p. 339f.

133 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 483.

134 *Die Piraten*, p. 6.

135 Autonomen: Groups of squatters, punks, and urban youth with explicitly anarchist politics and an uncompromising anti-statism “against patriarchy and imperialism internationally”. Arose in the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century, mostly in urban centers of the German-speaking countries. Best known for creating huge squatted cultural-residential centers and engaging in regular street clashes with the police, especially in Berlin, Hamburg, and Zurich – translator.

136 Compare to *Die Piraten*, p. 139.

137 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-odipus* [Anti-Oedipus], Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, p. 322; see especially pp. 286-338 as a comparison of the analysis herein.

138 Dieter Zimmerling, *Störtebeker & Co.*, Frankfurt am Main and Berlin: Ullstein, 1988, p. 324. See also “On the Trail of Folka ten Broke” in *Women Pirates*.

- 102 Clastres, p. 184.
- 103 Ibid., p. 189.
- 104 Ibid., p. 195.
- 105 Salentiny, p. 36.
- 106 Ibid., p. 36.
- 107 Ibid., p. 36.
- 108 Klaussmann and Meinzerin; see “The Golden Age of Piracy” in *Women Pirates*.
- 109 Clastres, p. 189.
- 110 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 492.
- 111 Ibid., p. 485
- 112 *Die Piraten*, p. 6.
- 113 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 576.
- 114 Ibid., p. 576.
- 115 Ibid., p. 576.
- 116 Ibid. pp. 532f.
- 117 *Die Piraten*, p. 55.
- 118 Ibid., p. 57.
- 119 Anne Bonny: Born in Ireland. Made the Caribbean unsafe for a few years together with Calico Jack Rackham, until she was sentenced to death in 1720. (See the chapter on Anne Bonny in *Women Pirates*.)
- 120 Ibid.
- 121 *Die Piraten*, p. 57.
- 122 Che Guevara, *Guerrillakrieg und Befreiungsbewegung* [Guerrilla War and Liberation Movement], Dortmund: Weltkreis, p. 72.
- 123 Ibid., p. 68.
- 124 Ibid., p. 84.
- 125 Ibid., p. 65.
- 126 *Die Piraten*, p. 55.
- 127 Salentiny, p. 25.
- 128 Ibid., p. 28.
- 129 Compare to Virilio and Lothringer, p. 123.

lambs in comparison to most captains and officers of national ships of war and commerce). Secondly, the active life does not stand in opposition to dreadfulness as such, but only to reactive life.

Pirates – who appeared, were viewed, and were battled as the “enemies of the world” – could not avoid answering their enemies with acts of cruelty. The pirates enemies had allowed pirates no life in Europe – or anywhere else. Recall that many pirates were escaped slaves from Africa and Asia. Naturally, these enemies reacted when pirate men and women attempted to find a different way to an active life. Pirates were left with no alternative than to live through robbery.

Raiding and plundering mercantile ships, and sometimes even war ships, was necessary; primarily in order to secure the requirements of life, but also as a representation of the engagement in a struggle made necessary through the pirates’ situation as “free enemies of the world”. Raiding was a matter of self-defense against those who ultimately only possessed that which they had beaten out of pirates and their like. (There were even pirates who described themselves as socialists, and justified their actions accordingly, like the famous Charles Bellamy.²⁸⁵) Beyond this, colonialism’s attempt to establish itself in the Caribbean posed the greatest threat to the pirates, and in this sense the mercantile nations were imperialist enemies and had to be fought. Just as much as pirates needed merchant ships and the Caribbean markets to make a living, they also needed their smooth space. It had to be defended against colonialist enclosure. An existential prerequisite for pirates was that in order to pursue commerce, the rich were forced to bring their wealth over a smooth space – at least for a short time outside of state-guaranteed security. Sea routes had to stay unsafe. Otherwise, as proved to be the case, piracy could not survive.

In any case, the greatest part of pirate atrocity sprang out of this double necessity to actively destroy the authoritarian enemy, who, from Europe, attempted to take control of all things and all spaces on earth. No wonder that according to Defoe, the pirate captain Charles Bellamy once fell upon the captain of a commandeered merchant ship, who stubbornly refused to join the pirate band, and yelled at him:

Damn ye, you are a sneaking Puppy, and so are all those who submit to be governed by Laws which rich Men have made for their own

§ Actually, there is no evidence that Charles Bellamy ever called himself a socialist. If he had, it would have more likely been done sarcastically, because in the early 1700s the term “socialist” did not mean what it came to mean in the 19th century, but rather referred to a follower of the ideas of the Dutch jurist Grotius, who called for one united international society rather than the various national societies. In a darkly humorous way, pirates could be said to have formed such an “international” society.

*Security, for the cowardly Whelps have not the Courage otherwise to defend what they get by their Knavery; but damn ye altogether: Damn them for a Pack of crafty Rascals, and you, who serve them, for a Parcel of hen-hearted Numbskulls. They vilify us, the Scoundrels do, when there is only this Difference, they rob the Poor under the cover of Law, forsooth, and we plunder the Rich under the Protection of our own Courage; had you not better make One of us, than sneak after the A---s of those Villains for Employment?*²⁹

The dreadfulness of activity lies in the lustful destruction of life-negating forces. It is “destruction become active, aggression bound tightly with affirmation”.³⁰ “That is ‘decisive in a Dionysian philosophy’: the moment when negation expresses an affirmation of life, destroys reactive forces, and returns to activity its full rights. Where the negative, like thunder and lightning, becomes a power for affirmation.”³¹ Compared to the “active dreadfulness” of pirates, the traditional, “reactively dreadful” attitudes – contempt for women, hatred of Aboriginal people, slavery – were barely to be found among them, and were often opposed directly. Women were often fully accepted, Aboriginal peoples were left mostly in peace, and some captains like Mission³² would immediately liberate all slaves found on commandeered ships.

Responsibility

If it is asserted that pirates fled from the order and discipline of statist society so as to live in active self-determination, then by no means does that mean that this life was entirely without rules. On the contrary, pirates show us that the twaddle about non-bourgeois lifestyles being totally open and without principle comes entirely from the comfortable, opportunistic-conservative niche that some people might occupy in any economically-oriented society. The development into an active form of life has nothing to do with this vulgar conception of societal laissez-faire. The pirate form of life, taken seriously, naturally had its principles and rules, to which individuals felt an obligation. The decisive difference from statist discipline and duty lay in the conscious decision to take on that obligation. The principles are taken to heart, and one feels responsible to follow them or not to follow them. What is piratical “order”? Individual responsibility instead of statist-societal expectations: responsibility instead of duty.

The various pirate groups each had their rules decided upon by all their members. Whoever didn't want these rules sought out a different group.³³ Never was the abstract Rousseauian idea of a social contract as concrete as on a pirate ship. “Whoever joined a pirate crew had to add his signature to the pirate articles or pirate rules, and swear upon a bible or a boarding axe to follow them.”³⁴

- 82 Clastres, pp. 198f.
- 83 Low: Born in England; starting as a harborside pickpocket, moved his way up to Caribbean pirate captain. His death is related here.
- 84 Salentiny, p. 141.
- 85 Clastres, p.196.
- 86 Ibid., p. 38.
- 87 Ibid., p. 198.
- 88 Both Blackbeard and Bartholomew Roberts played themselves up into leaders and rulers, and over time were accepted as such by the “common pirates”. “Suddenly Blackbeard cocked the pistol, blew out the candle and fired. Hands [a crew member] was hit in the knee and crippled for life. When Blackbeard was asked why he did this, he replied that if he didn't occasionally shoot a member of his crew, they would forget who he was” (*Die Piraten*, p. 148). This kind of behavior by the captain would have been unthinkable on pirate ships until then. The same is true of Roberts: “The style of his clothing was meant to underline the difference between him and his men” (*Die Piraten*, p. 162). “On one journey a drunken crew member insulted the captain. Roberts, overcome with fury, killed the man on the spot. Many of the similarly intoxicated comrades of the dr man were very resentful of this, especially one Thomas Jones ... The tumultuous events s whole ship in an uproar. One part of the crew took Roberts's side, the others sided with Jo In the examination of the matter that followed, the majority of the crew was of the view th captain's prestige had to be defended; since it was an honorary post, no crew member had th to maltreat him” (Ibid., pp. 163f.). In this story we see that despite voting procedures authorit by then considered an institution – and also that there was a great resistance against this de ment on the part of many pirates. Perhaps this defeat of the insignificant pirate Jones seal end of piracy as a free form of life: he received 360 lashes of the whip, an otherwise inconcei punishment among pirates. “This terrible punishment by no means convinced Jones that h wrong. At the first subsequent opportunity he and a few of his friends left Roberts” (Ibid., p.
- 89 Clastres, pp. 203ff.
- 90 Ibid., p. 204.
- 91 *Die Piraten*, p. 47.
- 92 Salentiny, p. 35.
- 93 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 490.
- 94 *Die Piraten*, p. 47.
- 95 Stirner, p. 237.
- 96 Compare to the story of Captain Low above.
- 97 *Die Piraten*, p. 47.
- 98 Compare to Clastres, pp. 183ff.
- 99 Clastres, p. 185.
- 100 Ibid., p. 187.
- 101 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 680.

55 Salentiny, p. 168.

56 Blackbeard (Edward Teach): English, appeared as a pirate in 1713 in the Caribbean, became the “epitome of the pirate himself”, until he was killed by American soldiers in 1718.

57 *Die Piraten*, p. 174.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

59 See, for example, Vine Deloria, Jr., *God Is Red*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003.

60 See Hans Reichhardt, *Die Germanen* [The Germanic Tribes]. Nuremberg and Hamburg: Tessloff, 1978, p. 27.

61 Jean-François Lyotard, *Apathie in der Theorie* [Apathy in Theory]. Berlin: Merve, 1979, pp. 32f.

62 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 527.

63 Compare to the section on “Responsibility”.

64 Salentiny, p. 24.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

66 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 527.

67 [In the book this note appears here but is not connected to anything in the text – in transcribing it, I arbitrarily decided to put it at the end of the “Christianity” section.] See the essay on “*Heidnische Unterweisungen*” [Lessons in Paganism] in Lyotard, pp. 7-71.

68 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 525.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 704.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 704.

71 Pierre Clastre, *Staatsfeinde* [Society Against the State], Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976, p. 45.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

73 *Die Piraten*, p. 29.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

75 Clastres, p. 48.

76 Defoe, Vol. I, p. 173.

77 *Ibid.*

78 Clastres, p. 197.

79 *Die Piraten*, p. 47.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

As long as an individual belonged to a group, the rules of the group were self-evidently his or her own, and were followed as a responsibility. Those who no longer belonged to the group would leave, exiting the contract. The rapid changes among pirate groups have already been mentioned.

The specific situation of the Caribbean pirates admittedly had the consequence that some principles were practically universal among them. Such principles seem to be unavoidable when a form of life has to develop and defend itself against a permanent threat: solidarity, honesty, determination, severity, mutual support, and so on. According to group and ship, variations on these principles became the guidelines of pirate life.

Most decisive and significant about these practices is that when the rules were agreed upon, anyone who was there, was there. Anyone who wasn't, wasn't. The idea of an absolutely perfect common entity was thus left to rot back at the European home ports.

The rules of pirate clans spring from nothing less than a serious attempt to find a form of life that can fulfill the piratical desire for freedom. It was thus observed that: “one of the most conspicuous characteristics of pirate life was the nearly complete lack of the characteristic signs of normal society, which pirates held in contempt: concentration of authority, class distinctions, the lack of a say in important matters.”³⁵ The rules of a pirate ship were considered carefully, and are in no way arbitrary. They serve a form of life determined to set no limits upon the active play of forces and their intensity, or upon the desire for freedom. The common life of pirates is the best-confirmed case of a society that merely looks to the production of desire, and requires no further justification.

And precisely because the pirates were concerned with a serious form of life beyond any moral legitimation, they were very much aware of the differences between themselves and others, and did the only right thing in such a situation. They emphasized that difference, they declared themselves the enemies of the world. They clamped down on the capitalist apparatus of accumulation. The pirate clans were clear about their rules; they lived up to principles that were honest, serious, and well-considered, and therefore worthy of defense to the death. Those who had different rules but active principles (such as other pirates and “honest” church people) were respected, and left alone. Those who showed hostility as reactive force were fought, and no quarter was given. The pirates did not fall into the trap of the repressive tolerance granted by rulers. They knew what it meant to preserve a difference from authoritarian power.

On the one hand: determined responsibility, strict anti-authoritarianism, and non-abstract ideals; thus unconditional solidarity, honest social security,

and non-bourgeois, amoral honor within the clan. “Within every crew of a sea robber ship, mutual aid was the highest commandment. If a sea robber visibly let down a colleague who was in danger, he was condemned as a common criminal by his peers.”³⁶

*Among themselves, on board their ships and in their retreats, they were passionate advocates of a primitive kind of democracy, with great respect for justice and the rights of the individual, and a corresponding resistance to tyranny and abuse of power. As raw and violent as they often were, they could be extraordinarily generous to those whom they liked and trusted, and inundated with jewels and Arabian gold the dealers of brandy and the willing girls who gave wings and made sweet their journeys over the broad seas. Ship comrades who lost an eye or a limb in the sea robber battles were allowed to stay on board as long as they liked. Many a wooden leg sounded on pirate decks, and its possessor would earn a half share of the booty as a ship’s cook, regardless of whether he knew anything of cooking or not.*³⁷

On the other hand: no mercy and no restraint against the authoritarian enemy. Friedrich Nietzsche had not failed to notice this curious characteristic of active groups.

*[W]hoever learned the “good” only as an enemy learned nothing other than “evil enemies”. ... With each other they prove so inventive in regard, self-control, tenderness, loyalty, pride, and friendship. ... The same people, when dealing with the outside – there where the strange, where strangeness begins – behave no better than predators uncaged. There they enjoy freedom from all social constraint, they ... revert to the innocence of a predatory conscience, become happy monsters that might depart from a horrifying sequence of murder, arson, rape, and torture with high spirits and spiritual calm.*³⁸

A motif of outsidership without compromises, one that runs from vagabonds, robbers, and pirates, through syndicalist wage workers and guerrilleros to modern youth gangs and heroes of Italian Westerns. And fascinates still, because it keeps alive the idea of a life lived in freedom, a life not incorporated into statist machinery.

Body

Over the course of the classical period (seventeenth, eighteenth century) the body was discovered as an object and target of power. It is easy to find signs for the great attention that the body received at that time, directed at

- 31 Ibid., p. 189.
- 32 Mission: Son of Provence nobility. First sailed around Martinique. Founded the “pirate’s settlement” Libertia on Madagascar, later destroyed by the islanders. Mission died soon after in a hurricane on the high seas.
- 33 Compare to the section below on “Organization”.
- 34 *Die Piraten*, p. 51.
- 35 Ibid., p. 47.
- 36 Salentiny, p. 34.
- 37 *Die Piraten*, p. 21.
- 38 Nietzsche, p. 31.
- 39 Michel Foucault, *Überwachen und Strafen* [Discipline and Punishment]. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977, p. 159.
- 40 Baruch de Spinoza, *Die Ethik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977, p. 159.
- 41 Salentiny, p. 35.
- 42 *Die Piraten*, p. 21.
- 43 Bartholomew Roberts: Born ca. 1682, probably in Wales. The last great pirate captain; commandeered about 400 ships from 1719-1722. Killed 1722 in battle with English warships. Klausmann and Meinzerin argue the well-founded thesis that Bartholomew Roberts was a woman (see the chapter on Bartholomew Roberts in the section on the Caribbean in *Women Pirates*).
- 44 Klausmann and Meinzerin, “Sea Princess Bartholomew Roberts,” in *Women Pirates*.
- 45 Defoe, Vol. I, p. 173.
- 46 Duerr, Hans Peter: *Sedna oder die Liebe Um Leben* [Sena or the Love of Life]. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990, p. 235.
- 47 Ibid., p. 239.
- 48 Klausmann and Meinzerin, “Sea Princess Bartholomew Roberts”, in *Women Pirates*.
- 49 *Die Piraten*, p. 55.
- 50 Mary Read: Originally from England. Pretended to be a Dutch man so as to sail on a merchant ship to the Caribbean, where she hooked up with the group around Anne Bonny. Died 1720, of a fever in prison while awaiting her execution. (See the corresponding chapters in the section on the Caribbean, on “Anne Bonny” and “Mary Read” in *Women Pirates*.)
- 51 Defoe, Vol. I, p. 125.
- 52 *Die Piraten*, p. 128.
- 53 Ibid., p. 128.
- 54 Caracciola: A Dominican monk from Naples, joined Mission’s crew (note 32).

- 5 Ulrike Klausmann and Marion Meinzerin, *Women Pirates* (in this volume, see section on Caribbean, "The Golden Age of Piracy"). Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997.
- 6 *Die Piraten*, p. 44.
- 7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* [On the Genealogy of Morals], Munich and Berlin: Goldmann, 1988, p. 24.
- 8 Stirner, p. 261.
- 9 *Die Piraten*, p. 28.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 11 Salentiny, p. 17.
- 12 Klausmann and Meinzerin: see "The Woman and the Old Sea" in *Women Pirates and the Politics of the Jolly Roger*
- 13 Salentiny, p. 17.
- 14 Stirner, p. 181.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- 16 Salentiny, p. 36.
- 17 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus* [A Thousand Plateaus], Berlin: Merve, 1992, p. 671.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 533.
- 19 *Die Piraten*, p. 55.
- 20 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 533.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 664.
- 22 Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Der Reine Krieg* [Pure War], Berlin: Merve, 1984, p. 70.
- 23 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 525.
- 24 *Die Piraten*, p. 28.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 26 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 525.
- 27 Gilles Deleuze, "Nomaden-Denken" ["Nomadic Thinking"], in Deleuze, Gilles, *Nietzsche Lesebuch* [Nietzsche Reader], Berlin: Merve, 1979, p. 121.
- 28 Charles Bellamy: Operated in the early eighteenth century around the Antilles and New England. Hanged 1726 in Boston.
- 29 "Captain Charles Johnson" (Daniel Defoe), *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates*, Vol. I & II. Rivington: London. 1724–28, Vol. II, p. 220.
- 30 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche und die Philosophie* [Nietzsche and Philosophy], Hamburg: eva. 1992, p. 95.

the body as an object of manipulation, forming, and dress; an object that obeys, answers, is conditioned, and whose powers multiply ... A "political anatomy" that is also a "mechanics of power" is on the rise. It defines how one can bring the bodies of others under control, not only to make them do what is demanded, but also to have them work in the manner desired: with predetermined techniques, rapidity, and effectiveness. In this fashion, discipline fabricates submissive and practiced bodies, obedient and quick to learn.³⁹

Because of this development in the "European body" it is worthwhile to observe the bodies of pirates, who were able to escape this discipline. In piracy, the body participates entirely in the process of molecularity. The body is not subjected to supervision, nor is its physicality either devalued or aestheticized (the two go hand in hand). It's not just that a pirate ship (in complete contrast to the armies of European nation-states) included a variety of bodily forms going about tasks according to their means, but also that physical energies and techniques remained in direct and concrete relation to piratical thinking, and always constituted key elements in pirate life.

A successful pirate crew had to be strong, mobile, and fast in body as in mind; one demanded the other. Intellect alone was as insufficient as mere unbridled strength. The artificial division between intellect and body was never completed, and there was no division between intellectual and manual work. There was no captain who did not fight, and no simple pirate who did not have to constantly keep his responsibility for the whole crew in mind. Everyone had to defend oneself on his or her own power. Each had to use his or her own head to make important decisions for themselves or their group. The great dependencies created through the radical division of intellectual and manual work (a separation that at the same time always requires elites and hierarchies) were strictly avoided, and with them the loss of important mental faculties. "The human intellect is empowered to understand very much, and all the more empowered if the body engages in a greater variety of activities."⁴⁰

It hardly needs to be mentioned that the reputation of the pirates as savages was related to their completely uncivilized, barbaric relation to their bodies: naked torsos, long and unwashed hair, ragged beards, scars, burns, uninhibited munching and guzzling, rough motions. The pirates were far removed from any cult of the body. If a pirate lost his ability to fight in the course of battle, he would take some task on the deck and be cared for by his fellow pirates, without in any way damaging the fundamental and concrete unity of thinking and manual activity. "With respect to taking care of the sick and disabled, they were far ahead of the 'Europeans' of that time. The 'health and disability fund' was financed in that everyone assigned a certain proportion of their booty to that purpose."⁴¹

Each individual body as a different quantum of energy, without any physical ideal; the importance of physical performance for each individual pirate, but without any absolute standard; the indivisibility of the body from all other activities; self-defense against domestication of physical powers; direct presence of the whole body in life on deck; an unmediated relation to the body, allowing comprehension of what material really means. That is the body of the pirate.

Death

The pirate's often cynical seeming contempt for death already had the rest of the world puzzled even while they were still alive. Death accompanied pirates wherever they went, and seemed to worry only a few. "Driven by force of superior arms into a corner of the quarter-deck, or standing on the scaffold before a great chattering crowd, still they often went into death with imperturbably composure and mocking humor."⁴²

There are some beautiful stories about the pirate contempt for death:

Bartholomew Roberts's crew never lost their gallows humor – even when, after the death of their leader,⁴³ they were chained to each other on board a ship of the Royal Navy, sailing towards certain death by hanging. When everything was taken from them, they joked that they should at least be left with half a penny to pay old Charon for the trip over the Styx. Of their meager meals, they observed that they were losing so much weight that in the end they would no longer weigh enough for hanging. When one of the prisoners indeed became fearful after all, and started reading the Bible, another asked him what his intentions were. "Heaven," answered the first. "Heaven, you fool," was the reply. "Have you ever heard of a pirate who went there? Give me Hell, it's more of a feast. I'm firing a thirteen gun salute for Roberts as soon as I get there."⁴⁴

Such attitudes were completely incomprehensible to a great many, but actually very easy to explain.

The life of revolt led by the pirates originates in the determination to "really live, or die trying". Graffiti in Belfast still asks today: "Is there a life before death?" The pirate would answer: "Only if you get one for yourself – like I did!" Pirates bade farewell from Christian ideals of preserving life at any price, for they started thinking about the quality of that life. The pirate wants to live to the full, intensely ... or not at all. Bartholomew Roberts, according to Defoe, summed up the pirate view in pointed fashion: "In an honest Service, there is thin Commons, low Wages, and hard Labour; in this, Plenty and Satiety,

question is: how can I deal with it so as not to become a prisoner? Everything else will follow from that.

Pirates always behaved this way. Perhaps the only true forerunners to Caribbean piracy were the Hanseatic pirates grouped around Klaus Störtebeker (the "Vitalien brothers"). They too did not want to have their lives dictated by rulers and merchants. When these tried to consolidate their power in the Hanseatic area, Störtebeker and his friends made the North Sea into their home. The life they lived was not dictated by the Hanseatic order, but their livelihood was based upon Hanseatic trade: they robbed the merchants. "'Enemies of the world, friends only to God,' according to the legend of the Vitalien brothers. At least this would mean that God was in favor of robbing rich merchants, of taking from the powerful that which they would probably not give freely."¹³⁸

There is much talk about fighting capitalism. Pirates show us how to do it.

We have arrived at the end of our sketch of pirate life. I will be accused of glorification, and I don't care. Anyone who doesn't like what has been written here doesn't like it. Enemies of pirates are friends of the State, and only rarely is there any help for them. Here an attempt has been made to demonstrate what we might gain by looking at the pirates today. Examining piracy helps us draw a picture of life in freedom of activity, and responsibility, of life without rulers, without State or economy. It shows us what it means to create that life against the opposition of State and economy. It confirms important theories, like that of the anti-statist society being a society without power, or of the necessity of a nomadic war machine. It teaches us to think differently about body, death, and religion. Perhaps it lends strength to a few who are rebelling. And perhaps – to a few who love the State, capital, and order – the calm hinterlands with appear a bit less secure.

notes

1 *Die Piraten* [The Pirates]. Amsterdam: Time-Life Books, 1980, p. 55.

2 Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum* [The Unique and Its Property]. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981, p. 392

3 Salentiny, Ferdinand: *Die Piraten*. Wels: Welsermühl, 1978, p.12.

4 Francis Drake: born ca. 1541 in England. Empowered by Elizabeth I to undertake gigantic tours of plunder on all possible sea routes. Died 1596 in battle with the Spanish. Henry Morgan: Born 1635 in Wales. Under protection of Charles II and English governors, robbed Spanish ships and cities in the Caribbean. Finally became Lieutenant Governor and Commander-in-Chief of English forces in Jamaica. Died there as a rich plantation owner around 1700.

would have made their task much more difficult, and subjected them to great dangers.

Pirate practice demonstrates that morality as a conscience-laden catalogue of rules, of “thou shalts” and “thou shalt nots”, ultimately serves State units. Not only is it incompatible with a primitive, nomadic life; it in fact represents the beginning of the end for such a life. Pirates prove that responsibility must replace morality if freedom is to survive.

Parasites

Pirates produced nothing with which to earn their livelihood. They robbed others. Pirates accumulated no capital; they squandered everything. Their victims were mostly merchant ships. Pirates “caused such great damage to ship travel that normal commercial traffic, and even the economies of a few countries, were greatly endangered. It made no difference whether a ship flew under Spanish, French, English, Indian, or Arabian flag. The pirates opposed all States, and any ship was acceptable as booty.”¹³⁴ Pirates threatened capitalism. Instead of a circulation of production and consumption, they set up one of robbery and squander. What pirates did is comparable to the burning of a factory by autonomen;¹³⁵ except that in the process pirates also took everything they needed for survival. The basis of their livelihood was “redistribution”. It comes as no surprise that the decisive campaign of extermination against the pirates was ultimately sounded by an association of English merchants.¹³⁶

Commercial concerns are powerful, and belong to the society of the State. Capitalism is totalitarian. It is clear that the pirates, without naming it as their enemy, and certainly without analyzing, nonetheless had to fight it. They lived off the attempt to establish capitalism, at the same time blocking that attempt.

Why not just walk away from capitalism and build “something else”, something “independent” (perhaps communes or something similarly libertarian and romantic)? Now that is easier said than done. In fact, it is as good as impossible. The combination of fighting capitalism while also exploiting it is admittedly far more exciting and intensive than mere escape. But finally, it is in the nature of capitalism that there can be no escape; it will always catch up. “The potency of capitalism consists in a logic that is never saturated, and always prepared to add more axioms to the existing ones.”¹³⁷ Thus: “let’s go get ‘em and see what comes of it!” – the pirate as parasite. Such parasitic groups have always created relatively free spaces within capitalism, broken through its constitutive chains, established a connection to the outside, and allowed for (more or less) autonomous living. The question is not how capitalism can be done away with, nor that of what should replace it. The

Pleasure and Ease, Liberty and Power; and who would not balance Creditor on this Side, when all the Hazard that is run for it, at worst, is only a sower Look or two at choking. No, a merry Life and a short one shall be my Motto.”⁴⁵ “Live fast, die young” – who would deny that here an alternative understanding of life and death is being expressed, robbing death of its incredible terror?

The pirate’s concern is not mere individual biological survival – as has been developed into an ideal – but everything that makes life lively: freedom, activity, intensity ... and that means danger, too. And precisely because of danger, the fear of death disappears, since “death was not opposed to life, but was a moment of life.”⁴⁶ Pirates acted like the Japanese samurai who “defused death through its constant presence, so that he could go into battle without trembling”.⁴⁷ Logically the death cult that was thus cultivated strengthened the pirates. Of course it filled their enemies with fear. “Death was a constant presence. In that they did not fear, they made it into an ally.”⁴⁸ That admittedly functioned well: “Intimidation through threat of violence [was] a basic weapon.”⁴⁹

After she was condemned to death, the pirate Mary Read⁵⁰ made it clear that this understanding of life and associated contempt for death represented the defining aspect of piracy, and that the combination of bourgeois life and Christian death would, of necessity, destroy the piratical form of life. “As to hanging, the thought is of no great Hardship, for were it not for that, every cowardly Fellow would turn Pyrate, and so infest the Seas, that men of Courage must starve.”⁵¹ Accordingly, the pirate ideal was by no means heaven, but that he has returned to New Providence.”⁵² Historians explain why: “Aside from the law of the jungle and the grappling knife, there were no laws on Nassau. In countless taverns, practically the only fixed constructions, the pirates would drink and fight until they fell over. They lay down with prostitutes in tents made of torn sails, or lost a fortune at gambling, knowing they could easily replace this through another tour of plunder.”⁵³

We might call the pirate’s concern the “dignity of life”. This was why individual death could be dismissed. Perhaps the enthusiasm for this dignity of life is the only element in which the pirate suppresses his individuality, but doing so precisely in order to preserve it down to the last consequence. Death cannot injure the dignity of life. Only subjugation can do that, and that is the true death of a pirate.

Christianity

Christianity was definitely a factor with pirates. Many a captured man of religion could reckon with mercy. The preferred reading on board was the Bible. There were more than a few enthusiastic ship preachers, such as the

famous Caraccioli,⁵⁴ who extolled the justice of the pirate cause: “[Caraccioli] stepped up before the crew and explained to them that they were ‘not sea robbers, but men who consciously defended the freedoms granted to people by God. Our cause, Caraccioli continued, ‘is just and noble, it is a matter of freedom.’”⁵⁵

At the same time, pirates represented the anti-Christians to Christian Europe. The famous Captain Blackbeard⁵⁶ – the most piratical of the pirates – was even considered the “Devil in the form of a man”. Admittedly these descriptions were not only the result of the church’s practice of portraying all who did not submit to it as the spawn of hell. Pirates themselves worked to acquire this reputation. As much as they paid due to certain preachers, they held no respect at all for the occidental Christian civilization and its representatives, Christian colonial rulers, church commandments, or clerical rules of life. Many laughed at the idea of heaven, and answered: “Heaven, you idiot? Have you ever heard of a pirate that went there?”⁵⁷ Christian rituals were tantamount to torture. Christian ideals of the modest, ascetic life, in consciousness of duty and fear of God, were exactly what pirates wanted to escape, and declared their enemy.

Blackbeard was proud of his reputation as “the Devil Himself” and took great lengths to maintain it.

*Before going into battle, he would stick burning fuses into his hat. These were long, slow-burning hemp strings that had been dipped in saltpetre and calcium. The effect was frightening. Clouds of smoke surrounded his face with the wild eyes and lousy hair, so that to his victims he really did look like the Devil personified. His resemblance to a kind of evil sea-robber ghost was completed through a bando-leer with three pairs of pistols, always loaded, powdered and cocked, and through additional pistols, daggers and grappling knives that he routinely carried with him.*⁵⁸

It may sound like a paradox, but pirate Christianity was thoroughly pagan. Like everything else about pirates, pagan myths, deities, and principles fit into their tribal form of life. Their absoluteness never exceeded a particular limit. Everything was subject to permanent revision,⁵⁹ and gods and rules were regularly switched according to circumstances – in the same way that some Germanic tribes would disavow themselves of their war god if they lost too many battles, and adopt a better one.⁶⁰ It is revealing “how heathens honored their gods. They made arrangements with them through sacrifices, promises, and ruses; through dubious agreements that gave pretext to suspicious rituals, all full of humor and full of fear.”⁶¹

The pirates already had superiority in hand-to-hand combat thanks to their better weaponry, the short saber and the grappling knife.”¹³⁰

Nomadic warriors are nothing other than true guerrillas. Anyone who wants to know what it means to be a guerrilla of the water must study the pirates and their battles.

Morality

To this day “revolutionary morality” is a subject of much discussion. What is the enemy of the state allowed to do, and what not? How are enemies to be treated? A strict, moralist prohibition of any dealings with enemies represents the one extreme; the radical lack of conscience of a Nechayev makes up the other.¹³¹ The pirates’ choice in the matter was clear. If they could gain advantage through any kind of contact with representatives of the State, they didn’t hesitate to do so. It hardly needs to be mentioned that pirates never held to any agreement if it was no longer fortuitous. After all, sea robbery for the State is the filibuster’s domain. Pirates never did anything other than employ cleverness and deception to secure free space and avoid danger. State partners were always laughed at, mocked, and betrayed. As soon as pirates were truly forced to make any kind of concessions to State rulers, contact became unthinkable. State rulers were there to be deceived and betrayed; otherwise no deals were made. This corresponds to the particular individualism of pirates, and the difference they consistently maintained from their enemies. “A word of honor, an oath, is only valid for one whom I entitle to receive it.”¹³² It is self-evident that pirates do not so entitle rulers. Beyond this, playing with State rulers is naturally only possible as long as it is fun and helps in developing and strengthening the pirate way of life. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the god of the nomadic war machinery unleashed by pirates is surely Indra, the Indo-Germanic god of war. His most important characteristic: “he dissolves ties and breaks agreements.”¹³³

For a long time, Blackbeard, one of the most famous pirate captains, made use of the conflict between the semi-independent American colonies and the English motherland. He was allowed to attack European merchant ships without disruption, and sell the booty in American ports under protection of the governor of North Carolina. This should not be confused with the activities of the filibusters. Blackbeard had not been sent by the governor, nor did he remain loyal. He merely made use of a situation that favored him. Any doubts should be dispelled when we consider that in the end, Blackbeard died in battle against an American governor’s forces.

Like the revolutionaries in Brecht’s play *Measures*, pirates had no compunctions about anything that served their cause. Any strong moral code

Nonetheless occasional physical conflict could not be avoided altogether. “But there were also times when no threat bore fruit; and then an open sea battle would break out, causing the heavens to tremble, coloring the water with blood.”¹²¹ The nomadic or primitive (and thus also piratical) battle is a very particular kind.

We might describe the basic characteristics of the guerrilla as follows: as far as organization is concerned, there is no fixed army of repression, no State legitimization, and no institutionalized training. With regard to combat, there is permanent mobility in place of positional war: sabotage and sudden attacks with rapid withdrawals, within an unpredictable area of operations. Che Guevara, the epitome of the guerrillero, specifies:

“The guerrillas attack has ... its particularities. It begins with an attack that surprises the opponent in its intensity and ferocity. Its end come just as unexpectedly to the enemy ... suddenly a new attack is carried out at a different point ... The main thing is that these attacks are unexpected by the enemy, and are carried out quickly.”¹²² “The most important quality of a guerrilla unit consists in its mobility. That allows it to withdraw far from the scene of battle within minutes if necessary. Thanks to mobility the unit can constantly attack the enemy in various places, and avoid being surrounded itself.”¹²³ “We have already pointed out that combat exchanges must be carried out without hesitation, rapidly, and with the greatest possible effect. They should last only a few minutes. When they are over, the fighters must withdraw without delay.”¹²⁴ “The strikes must follow upon one another without pause ... By day or night, the opponent must have the impression of being encircled.”¹²⁵

Pirate crews were anything but fixed, never mind legitimated by a State. Their training occurred directly in combat, not at a barracks. They carried out no front war, which would have been impossible with their arms. The terror all sea travelers felt of pirates was based above all on their sudden, unpredictable, lightning-like attacks: this is everywhere confirmed. “In the main they carried out lightning attack and employed corresponding tactics. Speed and surprise were of the essence.”¹²⁶ Therefore “[the frigate] was preferred by the pirates because of its speed and maneuverability in comparison to all other ship types.”¹²⁷ When boarding a ship, “the sea robber mostly used a short saber for dispatching his enemies. Pistols had the disadvantage that they could be fired only once during the [usually] short time of boarding, and could not be reloaded due to their length.”¹²⁸ This theory of tactics had been forwarded two thousand years earlier by the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu: “War is a way of deception.” “Speed is the most important thing in war.”¹²⁹ And once the pirates took that to heart, “the fate of the attacked merchant ships was usually clear from the outset. Only seldom did the captain and crew of a merchant ship raided by pirates have any chance to defeat their attackers.

Pirate Christianity was correspondingly diverse, in every sense. Not only did the significance of Christianity differ widely from ship to ship, it also appeared everywhere in a different guise. It was constantly mixed together with the most divergent of other religious perspectives: African tribal rites, voodoo (influences of the escaped African slaves upon pirate communities) or so-called cosmopolitan convictions. For this reason it is probably true “that nomads [pirates] offer no favorable terrain for religion. A warrior is always sinning against priests or God.”⁶² Accordingly Christianity was not the one religion of pirates, but took on particular and always different forms, and fulfilled greatly divergent functions, with the constant individual and collective development of pirate life. Christianity often appeared in piratical initiation rites, was a preferred object of visionary and fantastic thinking, and, as we heard above, was occasionally employed to legitimate pirate action. Christian thoughts were fluctuating points in the lively play of pirate life, admittedly without becoming superfluous or any less serious.⁶³

Pirates, detached from the forced Christian pseudo-tradition back home and coming together with people from many different countries (“on every pirate ship one meets a potpourri of nationalities”⁶⁴), used those fragments of Christianity from which they could not or would not depart as building blocks, and created their own pirate myths, their own pirate faith. Perhaps this was a strongly satanic faith, but on some level it remained very Christian; without bearing relation however to the absolutist Christian ideology of rule that brought so much more terror and destruction to the world than pirates ever did. “Catholics, Protestants, Presbyterians and Orthodox were neighborly with each other on pirate ships, quite in contrast to the strictly confessional Europe of that time. The absence of religious strife within pirate society was one of the basic prerequisites of its survival.”⁶⁵

Pirates succeeded in molecularizing Christianity by paganizing it. They took it down from its position of power, transformed it radically in the process of making it into a concrete part of their form of life, and created their own tradition. This tradition fed upon all that they did not want to surrender from Christianity, as well as their own experiences as pirates. It developed in keeping with pirate ideals and principles: “Nomads [pirates] have a vague, literally vagabond ‘monotheism’ that serves them well, along with their wandering fires. There is a sense of the absolute among nomads [pirates], but it is in a unique fashion atheist.”⁶⁶ That is the “heathen commandment” of the pirates.⁶⁷

Jolly Roger

The pirate flag, the Jolly Roger, varies. But the pattern is always the same: a black field with a skeleton or skull, promising no mercy. The pirate flag is

the true symbol of pirates, whatever the fascinating bandannas, earrings, grappling knives, parrots, or peg legs.

It is almost as though the Jolly Roger expresses everything that piracy has to offer – pirates, pirate ships, pirate treasures ... In short, everything that is piracy culminates in the flag. Indeed, as minimalist as the flag's design might be, we always have the black of death – of Satan, destruction, chaos and anarchy – and sometimes the red of the blood that must flow in war. There is always death grinning, throwing everyone into terror and only allowing the pirates to smile. And there are always knives, sabers, or hourglasses, unmistakably signaling a stubborn relentlessness and determination.

This is no official national or mercantile flag, announcing affiliation to an honest trade or a civilized State. Only darkness and death without compromise fly this mast; everything that pirates have in store for their enemies. They need no God who grants permission for their violence, no government to legitimate them. They need no pretty flag to portray their moral integrity. What does it mean that they do not need it? They reject hypocritical and authoritarian twaddle about morality and moral justifications; they mock and trample upon that. They restrict themselves to simple announcements: “We are the enemies of the world, because that is the only way for us to live, so watch out!” Their own production of desire is enough knowledge about how to live. They have overcome the drivel about divine commandments and duties to the State – *ni dieu, ni maitre!* So why have a flag as the practically holy symbol of some morally perfect identity, to be defended with pride? As their sign of recognition, the pirates offer only the torn rag with a death's head.

This death's head is inseparable from piracy. We have seen that pirates are the nomads of the sea. They change ships, groups, possessions, rules, hideaways, territories, routes, places to rob. Only one thing is the same wherever pirates appear: the black flag, with Death laughing. The Jolly Roger makes it clear wherein the true expressive power of a graphic symbol lies: in the concrete reterritorializations that occur on the body represented by the sign.

Piracy is finally a permanent deterritorialization, and pirates as seabound nomads are “a deterritorialization vector”.⁶⁸ Harbors are left behind, seas crossed; even ships are changed from time to time. Hence the release from all duties, terrestrial or divine, and the enthusiasm for the deterritorializing values of individuality, freedom, and responsibility, for euphoria of any kind, for the fantastic in its boldest forms. But deterritorialization cannot be viewed apart from constant reterritorialization, for “deterritorialization is for its part inseparable from associated reterritorializations”.⁶⁹ The excitement and attraction grow precisely out of this permanent interplay between de- and reterritorialization; where it is not of concern to block deterritorialization

the State, to destroy the statist form.”¹¹⁵ Nomadic war machinery functions molecularly: no arrangement, no uniformity, no command, no regulations, no supervision. No rigidity, not of language or of thinking, or of body or play, or of living and working together. In short: a defense of singularities, events, and nomadic (as opposed to despotic) unity, without compromises, using all available mechanisms.

We need now only compare this picture of the anti-statist war machine to that we have drawn of the pirates. We have seen that pirates are aptly described as nomads of the sea; that they are consistent enemies of the State; that they must attack merchant and war ships because it is a matter of “You or us! Despotism or freedom!” The entire organization of their common life is oriented towards preventing power. They were anti-economists so as to allow no room for class society.

If the pirates do not represent a nomadic war machine, who ever did? Everything fits, for “one might say that every time that someone defends themselves against the State (by resisting discipline, through revolt, guerrilla war, or revolution) a war machine is revived; a new, nomadic potential arises; and thus the reconstitution of a smooth space or the life form of the smooth space.”¹¹⁶

Guerrillas

The aim of the nomadic war machine is not war as a state of permanent physical violence or battle. This does not mean that violent exchanges are not held. The many pirate battles clearly demonstrate that their anti-statist war machinery could not get by without brutality.

But in place of bloodthirsty terror attacks, they operated much more by functionalizing their reputation as merciless scoundrels in a kind of “non-violent” surprise tactic: “use of violence was far from their preferred mode of achieving and objective.”¹¹⁷ “Pirates were masters of psychology and took ship after ship without even striking a blow, simply by driving their victims into submission through fear and terror.”¹¹⁸

Suddenly a ship appears by the light of the moon. Sail and deck are drenched in blood. The figure of a woman stands at the bow. In her hand she holds a grappling hook dripping blood, and uses it to strike repeatedly at a human form. The ghostly ship quickly approaches the merchant brigantine. The merchant crew is frozen with terror. Without putting up a fight, they surrender their cargo to the attackers. The idea for this scenario was Anne Bonny's.¹¹⁹ During the action she stood at the bow and struck at a stuffed mannequin with her hook. Previously she had drowned the puppet, hook, and ship in turtle's blood ... Anne Bonny planned her attacks with cunning and fantasy. The horrible shows she staged spared her plenty of battles.¹²⁰

War Machine

After the last sections we can say with some confidence that pirate crews were a type of primitive society: no State, no power, no economy. Primitive societies are not backwards or undeveloped, but are characterized through a consistently anti-statist and anti-authoritarian character. Quite apart from any period of history, they are the societies of “society without the State” (as the title of Pierre Clastres’ brilliant book directly conveys). We have already seen that statist organization is the only true enemy of the pirate, an enemy that is fought with all force and mercilessness. Nowhere else is the thesis of the nomadic machinery of war, directed against the State by anti-statist societies, as manifest as it is in piracy.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the first to recognize the nomadic war machine, basically argue as follows: as stateless societies, primitive societies face permanent threat from State units. The clan is always nomadic in the broadest sense of permanent mobility. Attacks from without, as well as the molar tendencies that always appear from within, subject it to constant danger. Meaning that the nomadic “war machine acts against the State, including potential States, whose rise needs to be hindered, and to an even greater extent against existing States, the destruction of which is made into a goal.”¹¹⁰ The consequence: “From the State’s perspective the originality of the warrior, his eccentricity, necessarily appears to be negative, a stupidity, deformation, madness, impropriety, usurpation, sin. Dumézil analyzes the three sins of the warrior in Indo-European tradition: he is against the King, against the priests, and against the laws issued by the State.”¹¹¹

The State and its enemies are at war, unavoidably and in every way. It is thus no cause for wonder when historians determine that during the “golden age” of piracy “thousands and thousands of pirates were waging de facto war on all the sea routes of the world.”¹¹² Primitive society could not ever survive if it did not have institutions for dealing with a state of war. A nomadic war machine is a necessary element of an anti-statist society. “The war machine was a nomadic invention, for it was the essential element constitutive for smooth space.”¹¹³ Its full force is directed exclusively against everything rigid, limiting, dividing, ordering, and molar, in short: the State.

Since this war is waged on all fronts, the highest priority of the nomadic war machine is not war as slaughter and/or even combat, but the preservation of smooth space as the space of freedom: “just that is its only and genuinely positive goal.”¹¹⁴ “If war necessarily arises from that, then it is because the war machine runs into States and cities, meaning forces [of enclosure] arrayed against the positive goal. From that moment the State, the city and the statist or city phenomenon become the enemy of the war machine, which sets out to destroy them. Here is where the war begins: to destroy the force of

through the reterritorialization it implies, but where reterritorialization must simply occur in its sequence, as a supplement. Only that this reterritorialization does not endanger the deterritorialization process, therefore it can – and only then – be greeted.

The Jolly Roger is one of these welcome reterritorializations. It is nothing by which pirates swear, or to which they must profess loyalty. Hence it is not a despotic symbol of the sort that constricts all lines of liberation (like a national flag, a dress insignia, a corporate symbol, or a family coat of arms). The Jolly Roger is the picture that occurs to pirates, entirely without ideological color, as an expression of their radical form of life. It is the field over which the pirates’ deterritorializing lines criss-cross, repeatedly. We might steal a formulation from Deleuze and Guattari, and assert that the Jolly Roger, “as a fiery, eccentric or intensive flashpoint, finds itself outside territory, and only exists in the movement of deterritorialization”.⁷⁰ The latter seems to be undeniable: the idea of a Jolly Roger flying on the flagpole of a government building should startle us. Its only place is wherever the currents of deterritorialization carry it: on a motorbikers jacket, as a tattoo, or – still the best idea – high on a ship’s mast.

It is no exaggeration that a Jolly Roger is largely what makes the pirate a pirate. As the material announcement and confirmation of a piratical form of life, it never lets the pirate forget why he or she is a pirate sailing under this flag.

The pirate flag teaches us that the perfection of expression in a graphic symbol lies in the unmediated nature of the reterritorialization implied.

Captain

Pierre Clastres defines primitive societies as those without power in the sense of institutionalized authority. This is especially visible in the role of the aboriginal chief, who must take over various tasks for the tribe without being empowered to issue commands – without being a ruler. The latter is impossible, because a primitive group is marked through “a radical rejection of authority, an absolute negation of power.”⁷¹ Among aboriginal peoples, for example, the chief must fulfill the following tasks:

1. hold speeches so that the principles of the tribe are not forgotten;
2. constantly give gifts to members of the tribe (which is why he is the only one allowed to produce more, and to keep a limited store of his production);
3. mediate conflicts.

He must do so not as a judge issuing verdicts, but by appealing to the parties in the conflict to avoid endangering the tribe through their disputes.

Only in the case of war is the chief allowed to give orders. He gains and maintains acceptance only when he constantly proves anew that he can fulfill all his roles (that he is a good speaker, a courageous warrior, and so on), and without ever assuming that he could rule over the tribe. Prestige and his own unpretentiousness are the only things upon which the chief can depend. Should he lose these strengths, this time as chief is over, and the tribe seeks a new one. The primitive tribes of such chiefs were, according to Clastres, societies without States – meaning without power, without subjugation or exploitation. There are ultimately two societal types: “There are the primitive societies, or societies without States, and there are societies with States.”⁷² If the chief can suddenly command “on his own authority”, if he is obeyed without question, then there is institutionalized authority, States, subjugation, exploitation.

But what does this all have to do with pirates? Pirate society was also a society without a State, and without power. It could never have been anything else, because “a hatred of authority of any kind was an essential characteristic of every true sea robber”.⁷³ It is remarked appropriately that “pirate society [was] a guild without ideological ambitions”.⁷⁴ A theory of the pirate captain, analogous to Clastres’ description of the aboriginal chief, should serve to clarify this relation.

Much like this chief, with minor differences, the pirate captain fulfills three tasks for the crew:

The captain first of all serves as an orientation for all pirates in the crew. Sometimes not even speaking a common language, they see their similarities in their captain. It is not so much the force of the word that the captain employs (as in the case of the chief) but his or her direct relation to the pirates on the one hand, and to that which is expressed in the Jolly Roger on the other. The captain is a personified reinforcement of the flag, a guarantee of direct connection to the (timeless) springs of piracy, an assurance of solidarity. Again, not through the word, but through the embodiment of the principles united in the Jolly Roger. In a minor variation on Clastres we might write: “Metaphors of the pirate crew, image of their myth – that is the pirate captain.”⁷⁵

Second, the captain fulfills the necessary function of one who gives the crew something when it wants something. The captain is assigned a special portion of the booty, but only so that each pirate has someone from whom he or she can at any time take a desired object. The captain is thus not richer than the other pirates – he is merely the keeper of their stockroom. One of the most celebrated pirate captains, Bartholomew Roberts, was permitted,

overproduction was unavoidable there were feasts, like the potlatches held by tribes like the Kwakwaka'wakw in North America, where the whole excess was eliminated. Whatever the tribe could use directly was used immediately; everything else was put aside as an unnecessary burden. The relationship to power among pirates, who are also a stateless society, is astonishingly similar.

The captain, like the chief, had the function of keeping a larder. What did the rest of the pirates do with their shares of the booty? The answer is simple. As soon as they were on land they acquired everything they needed for survival in the next weeks. The rest was used to eat, drink, pay whores and play cards for a few days, until there was nothing left. Then it was time to set sail again. “The sea robbers nearly always gave away their money on land as quickly as they had got it. Among sea robbers money reached the highest speed of circulation ever recorded in the whole of economic history.”¹⁰⁵

The potlatch finds its counterpart in the much-celebrated buried treasure: “In contrast to merchants, they [the pirates] assigned no special value to money. Many a pirate hid his robbed jewels, gold coins, and other gems on uninhabited and inhospitable islands. Thus one or another pirate treasure is surely still buried in the sand of some Caribbean island or on Madagascar.”¹⁰⁶ A pirate never withdrew with the booty to safety to begin a “new life”. “Most pirates died at sea, and the sea became their grave.”¹⁰⁷ The rest were hanged on “execution deck”. The tours of plunder were a necessary and beloved part of their way of life, receiving the greatest attention from all sides. But they never served the acquisition of wealth. “Their concern was not to plunder in order to become rich. Their goal instead was to gain booty as quickly as possible with the least possible effort, so as to fritter it away just as quickly.”¹⁰⁸ Exactly herein lies the distinction between true pirates and all other sea robbers. Like all societies without States, pirates knew nothing of economics, possessions, or capital accumulation. Not that they were too stupid, lazy, or weak to develop such economics. Pirates, of all people, could have ended up among the richest men of that time, but riches meant little to a pirate. The reason was that modern economy consists in meaningless production for the sake of production, and therefore requires States, power, exploitation, class society. The pirate holds property in contempt, because it has nothing to do with his desire for freedom. Actually, it is an obstacle to that desire. The pirate is well aware of the danger that accumulation of goods represents to a life in freedom and equality, meaning to the whole of pirate society.

Like primitive societies, pirates are “societies without economy out of a refusal of economy”.¹⁰⁹

Capital

Pierre Clastres argues that while primitive economy can be described as “subsistence economy” so as to differentiate it from modern economy in State societies, it should by no means be conceived as an economy of scarcity, of just enough for survival. Instead we must understand primitive economy as performing the minimum labor for satisfying elementary needs, without interest beyond that in capital accumulation or acquisition of possessions – for true pleasure consists in leisure. Aside from a couple of months a year, there was hardly a primitive tribe where more than four or five hours were worked a day.⁹⁸ As we have seen, the chief, as the only one to produce more and keep a store of goods, also has no property. The chief is merely responsible for creating a larder available to everyone.

It is not technical imperfection that prevents accumulation, but “the refusal of an unnecessary surplus, the will to adapt productive activity to the satisfaction of needs. And nothing more.”⁹⁹ That means that as soon as energetic needs are globally satisfied, nothing can persuade the primitive society to want to produce more, meaning to invest its time in work without a goal, when this time is available instead to leisure, war, games, or celebration.”¹⁰⁰ The assertion follows that “so-called primitive societies are not societies of scarcity or subsistence (for want of work), but on the contrary societies of free activity and smooth space, which have no need for a factor of labor because they do not amass goods.”¹⁰¹ Hoarded property can only appear when there is power, meaning when someone can command others to work for him. Hoarded property is thus always private, and creates a society hierarchized through relations of property – a society in which working and acquiring property become categorical imperatives.

Primitive society produces no surplus because everything produced beyond the securing of food, clothing and housing is of no use. Arts and crafts, such as the making of baskets, beautiful clothing, masks and so on, are mostly a matter of leisure. Instead of producing far too much, one prefers to do that which creates pleasure: “hunting, fishing; feasts, drinking sessions; ... satisfaction of their passionate love for war.”¹⁰² For egalitarian reasons, it is made impossible that one should stand above the rest of the tribe by amassing goods. It is also completely useless, for “what would be the use in a primitive society of being rich among the poor?”¹⁰³ The situation is clear: “In the economic activity of a primitive society, of a society without a State, there is nothing that allows the introduction of a difference between rich and poor, for no one here feels the peculiar desire to produce more, to possess more, to seem to be more than one’s neighbor. Everyone is equally capable of satisfying material needs, and the exchange of goods and services among them persistently inhibits any private accumulation of goods. The development of a desire for property, which is ultimately a desire for power, is thus rendered impossible.”¹⁰⁴ When

according to Defoe, to “Use the great Cabbin, and sometimes [the crew] Vote him small parcels of Plate and China; but then every Man as the Humor takes him, will use the Plate and China, intrude into his Apartment, swear at him, seize a Part of his Victuals and Drink, if they like it, without his offering to find Fault or Contest it.”⁷⁶

Third, the captain must make sure that conflicts are immediately regulated, so as to prevent trouble for the ship. He does not deliver the verdict, however, but appeals to the parties in conflict to regulate the problem. Either the argument is put aside, or one of the parties decides to leave the ship, or the pirates agree to a violent resolution (usually consummated on land), the results of which are accepted without appeal.

The captain’s role is to fulfill these tasks for the group. They do not signify either power or profit for the captain. “They only permit him to be Captain,” Defoe wrote, “on Condition that they may be Captain over him.”⁷⁷ In keeping with Clastres, this relation of crew and captain is much the same as in other stateless societies: “The chief must serve the society, while the society itself – the true location of power – exercises its authority as such upon the chief.”⁷⁸ Among the pirates it was therefore clear that: “privileges were considered a first step towards autocracy, and treated accordingly. The pirate captain therefore possessed no form of constitutional authority, and had no claim to special privileges.”⁷⁹

Orders can be issued only in battle or during raids. “Only in battle was the pirate captain obeyed.”⁸⁰ Therefore only those who prove themselves clever, strong, and brave in battle can become captain; only those who do so repeatedly can remain captain. “It was self-evident that pirates sought out a captain who seemed especially appropriate for the post – ‘someone superior in knowledge and boldness’, as Defoe observes, ‘they call that pistol-ready’.”⁸¹ Once the battle is over, so is any notion of command. “We know that preparing and carrying out a military expedition provides the only opportunity in which a chief [or a pirate captain] can exercise a minimum of authority, which again is based entirely upon his technical competence as a warrior. After the battle, regardless of its outcome, the war chief once again becomes a chief without power. In no way does the prestige following victory transform into authority.”⁸² Again, whoever tries to go for more will be deposed. A few of the especially great pirate captains therefore met with a sad fate:

*One day Low⁸³ nonetheless had the temerity to kill his quartermaster, with whom he had had a dispute, while the man slept. Because his crew found this injustice intolerable, they abandoned Low with a bit of gunpowder and food on an uninviting portion of the Cuban coast, leaving him to his fate. Low was found by an English warship and deported to Martinique. There he was recognized by several of the ship owners he had swindled, put before a court, and hanged.*⁸⁴

Just as the aboriginal tribe only accepts its chief as long as he remains true to the society, the pirate group accepts its captain only if he represents true piracy; meaning that he fulfills his tasks, proves himself repeatedly in battle, and does not try to rule. He can only depend, we shall now repeat, “on the prestige that the society bestows upon him”.⁸⁵ Put differently, “the power of the chief [pirate captain] is dependent upon the good will of the group”.⁸⁶ There is no doubt that pirate society is a stateless society. According to Clastres, it is therefore a society without power. A theory of the pirate captain confirms this. Clastres states that the end of powerlessness and statelessness arrives when “the chief favors the chief”⁸⁷ and gets away with it. Is it really a coincidence that the last great pirate captains – Blackbeard and Bartholomew Roberts – were precisely those who played the boss, and became the first to succeed at it?⁸⁸

Organization

A society without power has corresponding organizational and constitutive forms.

First, it is divided into small groups. We saw above that pirates are always in the midst of crew changes. Clastres again confirms that this defines a stateless life without authority. “In the world of the savage we do in fact observe an extraordinary fragmentation into ‘nations’ and tribes, societies in local groups. These are always taking great pains to preserve their autonomy within the whole.”⁸⁹ Further: “The atomization of the tribal universe is an effective means of blocking the creation of socio-political wholes that integrate local group; but beyond that, it also prevents the rise of a State, which in its essence is a unifying factor.”⁹⁰ The particular organization of each local group is in any case egalitarian, defined by general participation. “But in the heat of battle important decisions were generally made through hand signals.”⁹¹

As we have seen, among pirates there is an idea of basic rules for living together based on social consensus. And the captain’s lack of authority leads to shared decision making, as confirmed in all reports. Plans were made together, problems discussed in common, decisions reached cooperatively. “Every important decision, such as whether to privateer a ship or determine an area of operations, was discussed in a full assembly on board and reached through a majority resolution. Every crew member had one vote in the matter, whether captain, ship’s mate, or simple sailor.”⁹²

Perhaps the captain, generally considered experienced and clever, had more proposals and ideas than others. Nonetheless he or she would have been completely unable to force his or her will upon the crew – neither a plan nor a resolution. The captain had to consider the common will, even if it could be

influenced. In fact the captain had to adopt the common will so as to avoid becoming unpopular. “The chief is more like a leader or a star than a man of power, and is always in danger of no longer being recognized by the tribe, and abandoned.”⁹³ It is no different with the pirate captain.

Certainly there were no formal democratic voting procedures on pirate ships, but lively arguments instead, ultimately allowing only two possible outcomes: consensus or dissolution of the group. “If a large minority was of a different opinion, it would leave the ship and take off on its own.”⁹⁴ The free determination of the individual, taken as a fundamental principle from the very beginnings of piracy, was untouchable, “for the individual is the relentless enemy of every generality, every band, meaning every binding tie.”⁹⁵ Self-determination could not be violated without causing general dismay among the pirates, who would see therein an attack upon the foundation of their life.⁹⁶

To the pirates, anything less than the living determination of their common life, without deadening abstractions and formalisms, was inconceivable. Law was in the heart, not in a book. Decisions arose from a common grappling among individuals, not elite government debates. Life was organized on the daily basis of its conditions, instead of according to predetermined duties. That was the common life of the pirates.

Anything else was little more than a subject for mockery. One of their favorite pastimes was to stage European court procedures, revealing them in all their silliness. Daniel Defoe reports how one such theatre piece ended:

(Finally the judge asked in a loud voice if supper was ready).

Prosecutor: “Certainly, my lord.”

Judge: “Then hear me, you Scoundrel over there in the Court’s Dock. Hear Me, you there, hear Me. You must do Penance for three reasons: first, because it would be improper for Me to sit here as a Judge and not have Anyone hanged. Second, You must hang because You have a Face for the Gallows. And third, You must hang because I am hungry. For know, You there, it is a Custom that should the Judge’s Supper be ready before the Trial is over, the Prisoner self-evidently must be hanged. That is the Law, you Rogue. Take Him away!”⁹⁷

We see that a serious struggle over decisions, common principles, and appropriate organizational forms fit well with pirate individualism, and with desire and satirical lightness within a living and free community.